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*STRZYGOWSKI AND HIS THEORY OF EARLY  
CHRISTIAN ART*

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The study of the monuments of the early centuries of the Christian Era has hitherto received its inspiration from one or other of two sources. Christian scholars, like De Rossi and Wilpert and Kraus, have been interested in the subject because of its Christian content and significance, and classical scholars, like Wickhoff and Riegl, have studied the monuments of this period as the expiring forms of classic art. Both classes of scholars have, in great measure, confined their observations to the monuments of Italy, especially to those of Rome and to the distinctly Roman provinces. Against this point of view that "All roads lead to Rome," a new battle-cry is raised, "*Ex oriente lux.*" It is not to Rome, but to Alexandria and Egypt, Ephesus and Asia Minor, Antioch and Syria, Jerusalem and Palestine, that we must look for the solution of early Christian and mediæval art. The new champion is Dr. Josef Strzygowski, and he is gathering adherents amongst the younger writers in various German universities.

We assume that little is known about Strzygowski in this country. His works are not translated into English and his name does not yet figure in our biographical dictionaries. From the German *Wer ist's?* we gather a few biographical details. He was born in 1862 at Biala in Galicia, near Bielitz in Austrian Silesia; his father was a manufacturer, his mother, Edle von Friedenfeldt, belonged to a family raised to the nobility by Charles VI. He received his education at the Realschule at Jena, the Gymnasium at Vienna, and the Universities of Vienna, Berlin, and Munich. Prior to his university studies he had gone

into the manufacturing business, but broke away and determined to become a scholar in 1883. In 1895 he married Elfriede Hofmann, and has had four children. Their names, Elfi, Sese, Senta, Nora, are not uninteresting.

An adequate appreciation of Strzygowski through his works would be no easy task. His articles cover a wide field and are scattered in many scientific periodicals; his books are rapidly increasing in number, but his most important work, a General History of Byzantine Art, is not yet published. We shall content ourselves, therefore, with calling attention to a few examples of his work, especially to such as will give some notion of his theory of early Christian art.

In 1885 he published his *Iconographie der Taufe Christi*. This book was published in Munich, was dedicated to Heinrich von Brunn and to Anton Springer, and is apparently a developed doctor's thesis. Nowhere else can one find so full a treatment of the representations of the Baptism of Christ. The 169 illustrations give it the character of a *Corpus*, especially in the early periods of Christian history. Not content with early Christian, Byzantine, Lombard, and Carlovingian representations, he traces his theme down to the beginning of the Renaissance in German, French, English, Flemish, and Italian sources. His comprehensive command of material and his careful attention to all the variations of his theme resulted in making this volume a model of that "*Detailforschung*," without which as a foundation general treatises have little value. It may be noted in passing that in this volume, apart from the emphasis given to Byzantine, Russian, and German monuments, there is evinced no oriental or anti-roman bias.

Less comprehensive in scope, but equally careful in treatment, is his study entitled *Calenderbilder des Chronographen vom Jahre 354*, published as *Ergänzungsheft No. 1* of the *Jahrbuch des kaiserlich-deutschen archaologischen Instituts*, 1888. In this case he is examining a manuscript ultimately of Roman origin, but is led to distinguish between the ancient calendars of the East and those of the West. The study of this class of miniatures is thus leading him to observe the characteristics of oriental miniatures in contrast to those of Roman origin.

During the two years from April, 1888, to April, 1890, the young scholar made his *Studienreise*, visiting Salonica, Mount Athos, Athens, Constantinople, the west coast of Asia Minor, the Caucasus, St. Petersburg, and Moscow. This journey gave him an opportunity of personally inspecting many Byzantine monuments, inspired a series of articles, and deepened a resolve to devote his chief energies to a comprehensive History of Byzantine Art. After his return from this journey we find him in 1891 installed as privat-dozent in the History of Art at the University of Vienna, a position from which he was called in 1892 to a professorship in the University at Graz. His *Byzantinische Denkmäler* (1891-1903) represent very inadequately his activity at this period. Here he published the important Armenian Evangelary from Etschmiadzin, as a prelude to a general discussion of Armenian miniature painting. Here also, in collaboration with Professor Forchheimer, he gave a detailed and historical account of the cisterns of Constantinople. Constantinople in his view does not represent a source of new art motives. It was a new Rome, a maelstrom of classic and oriental forms, a receiving and distributing centre for many centuries. The cisterns point to Alexandria as an important source of the complex product known as Byzantine art. Ten years elapsed between the publication of the second and third volumes of the *Byzantinische Denkmäler*, and to this third volume Strzygowski contributes only a general introduction on the Rise and Triumph of Byzantine Art. The remainder of the volume is the work of his pupils. But for our purposes the catalogue of Strzygowski's writings at the end of the volume is of special interest. Here he has enumerated only such articles as are concerned with the history of oriental art and published between the years 1885 and 1903. They are no less than 71 in number, distributed as follows: 3 are of general character, 15 have reference to Egypt, 10 to Syria and Palestine, 10 to Asia Minor, 8 to Constantinople and Thrace, 2 to Salonica and Macedonia, 6 to Greece, 5 to the West in its relation to the East, and 12 deal with iconography and miscellaneous subjects. When we remember that during this period was founded the *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, a periodical to which Strzygowski has been from the outset a constant contributor of articles, notes,

and numberless reviews, we begin to form some notion of the great mental activity of a man already well occupied with university lecturing and other official duties. The volume entitled *Orient oder Rom*, bearing the date 1901, is not only an excellent sample of his works, but illustrates also the ever-growing tendency in his mind to emphasize the Orient and to diminish the importance of Rome as a factor in the civilization and art of the early centuries of our era. In the introduction he attacks the theories of Wickhoff, as believing in the development of a specifically Roman art during the first three centuries of the Christian Era, while admitting oriental influences during the fourth and fifth centuries; Kraus, on the other hand, he represents as believing that Alexandria was the formative influence for the first three centuries, and that Rome then became the centre throughout the entire period of the Middle Ages. To these theories Strzygowski opposes his own. Kraus, he holds, is right in recognizing oriental influences in the early period and wrong in emphasizing Rome for the later; Wickhoff is right in recognizing the Orient in the later period, wrong in supposing that there was any specifically Roman art in the first three centuries. Stated baldly, whoever explains Christian art through the Orient is right, whoever raises the banner for Rome is wrong. This is the point of view for which henceforth Strzygowski becomes a violent partisan. The four articles which make up the remainder of the volume are specific interpretations of this general view. The first relates to a Palmyrene tomb dating from the year 259 A.D. The plan of the tomb, its vaults, and its decoration, he contends are not Roman, but hellenistic. This, however, might readily be granted even by the advocates of Roman art. The second article describes a *Christus-relief* in the Berlin Museum, which he properly classes with other similar sculptures as exhibiting hellenistic and specifically Asia-Minor sources of inspiration. This might also be admitted without denying all individuality to Roman art. Then follows an article on a figured fragment of wood-sculpture from Egypt. The types here figured have some analogy with those on the Helena sarcophagus in the Vatican and with some well-known ivory carvings in Paris and elsewhere, but the reasoning in support of the thesis that these types are all of

Egyptian origin is inconclusive. The fourth article concerns what are popularly known as Coptic tapestries with Christian subjects, a little-appreciated class of objects which may readily have exerted an important influence upon later ecclesiastical wall painting and window-glass decoration. As nearly all these textiles have been found in Egypt and the types represented are not specifically Roman, the contention that they belong to the Christian art of the Orient will not be seriously contested. The final article treats of Important Remains of Constantine's Building on the Site of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem. The important remains here referred to are portions of an ancient decorated cornice, analogous in style to architectural remains at Damascus, Palmyra, and Baalbec, and referable in this case to a portion of the building erected by Constantine himself. This cornice, he concludes, very properly, is non-roman in style. It belongs to a family, the other members of which are found in Syria and in Egypt, but not in Rome. The domical building and the basilica erected here by Constantine, and designed to be more beautiful than any other, give to Jerusalem an importance in the history of art which is often forgotten. But it does not necessarily follow that Strzygowski is right in looking to Jerusalem for the origin of the basilica or in his belief that from Jerusalem Christian art as well as Christianity itself radiated to the ends of the earth.

In 1903 he published his *Kleinasien*, the sub-title of which, *Ein Neuland der Kunstgeschichte*, was expressly designed to attract attention. This is not a work inspired by his own explorations, for the materials of the volume consist of photographs and plans taken by G. I. Smirnov in 1895 and by G. W. Crowfoot and J. G. C. Anderson in 1900. Strzygowski, however, publishes and explains the significance of the revelations of these explorers in central and southern Asia Minor. It is not easy in a few words to summarize the contents of this volume, and a very brief sketch must suffice. Strzygowski distinguishes between the art of the coast cities and that of the interior. The coast cities were in communication by sea with the chief cities of the hellenistic world. Near the coast, therefore, we are apt to find throughout a longer period basilicas oriented towards the East, preceded by atria, and covered by wooden roofs; whereas in the interior

oriental features, derived from the earlier civilizations, are widespread. Here we find, for example, churches with two towers on the façade, recalling Hittite and Jewish prototypes; doors and windows piercing the lateral walls, as in Syria; compound piers, instead of columns; arches instead of architraves; vaults in place of coffered wooden ceilings. These oriental characteristics make their way to the coast and thence spread to the western world. Asia Minor becomes therefore, with Syria, an important source of inspiration not only for Byzantine, but for mediaeval European architecture. As compared with the churches of northern and central Syria, those of Asia Minor are not inscribed with their dates, hence the dating problem is more difficult, although Strzygowski is probably right in referring some of these buildings to a period as early as the fourth century. In Asia Minor, besides the basilica various buildings of central construction are found; octagons with and without galleries, octagons pierced by the cross as described by Gregory of Nyssa, the domed basilica (*Kuppelbasilica*) and the domed cruciform church (*Kreuzkuppelkirche*). The domed cruciform church appears to have existed in Armenia as early as the time of Nerses III (640-661), later became a popular Byzantine type, and from Constantinople may have spread to Asia Minor as well as to Venice and western France. The revelation of this series of churches in the heart of Asia Minor establishes for the history of architecture a new link connecting the East and the West.

Sculpture and painting for this period in Asia Minor are still largely an unknown quantity, though the few examples accessible reflect a similar mixture of hellenistic and oriental qualities. Rome, as an artistic power in Asia Minor, may now be set aside.

The concluding chapter of this volume treats of the origin of Romanesque art, and points out in rather unsystematic fashion the many oriental features which found their way into European art. These influences, he believes, came not through Rome, but direct from the Orient to such distributing centres as Ravenna, Milan, and Marseilles. In the Carolingian empire oriental and Germanic ideals met and formed a new product analogous to that established at Byzantium by the intermingling of oriental with Hellenic aims. If any one would like to follow Strzygowski

further in this direction, let him read his pamphlet entitled *Der Dom zu Aachen und seine Entwicklung* (1904), where the oriental character of the great Carlovingian church is developed in detail.

The year 1904 marks the publication of two important works by Strzygowski, one a detailed catalogue of the Coptic monuments in the Cairo Museum, entitled *Koptische Kunst*, the other an exhaustive study of the ruins of *Mschatta*, published in the *Jahrbuch der königlich-preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, 1904, pp. 225-373. To the one, scholars will turn for accurate knowledge of the little-known but important field of Coptic sculpture, to the other for types of elaborate decorative motives which spread from Mesopotamia both east and west. The magnificent slabs of sculptured ornament from *Mschatta*, now the pride of the Berlin Museum, aroused Strzygowski's enthusiasm to the highest pitch. His appreciation of these sculptures and his instrumentality in bringing them to Europe he considers one of his most important works. *Mschatta* is not a Christian monument, but it is henceforth to be reckoned with in the history of Christian art as furnishing the most striking example of certain types of ornament found on Christian monuments in the West.

Strzygowski's general theory of Christian art is developed somewhat systematically in Schiele's *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, now in course of publication. The article *Altchristliche Kunst* is by Strzygowski, and appeared in 1908. The first three centuries of our era he describes as the hellenistic period. Jerusalem was the starting-point. From the synagogue was derived the Christian basilica; from the tombs of Palestine came the cruciform ground-plan; and from the East, also, buildings of circular and polygonal plan. Sculpture and painting were likewise hellenistic. From Asia Minor came the typical forms of Roman sarcophagi; from Alexandria and Antioch the artistic motives in catacomb paintings and early miniatures. Carthage, Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, the important centres, suffered from disastrous earthquakes. Rome was more fortunate in the preservation of her monuments. The second period, covering the second three centuries, is described as the oriental period. During this period Rome stagnates, Constantinople becomes not only the centre of the Empire, but also of artistic activity. Hel-



lenistic types cease to develop, or are fused with oriental forms from Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, Armenia, and Mesopotamia. The monasteries of Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor are now exerting a wide influence. With their spread come the oriental types of buildings, with towered façades, vaults, and domes; oriental methods in sculpture and painting, substituting historical for the mythological and symbolic treatment of religious themes; and various oriental arts, such as ivory carvings, mosaics, and enamels. From Syria and from Egypt come such important types as the bearded Christ and the enthroned Mary. The later periods he treats under the headings, Islam, Byzantium, the West. The taste for fine ornament without human elements, which characterized the art of Islam, was at once anti-hellenic and anti-christian and was derived from the interior of Western Asia. Byzantium looked to Asia Minor for the architects of such important buildings as Hagia Sophia and the Church of the Apostles, and adopted many Armenian and Persian types of ornament. Western Europe, after being deeply impressed with a *Schmuckstil* consisting largely of glass inlays derived from Persia and of braid ornaments from Armenia and Mesopotamia, entered upon the so-called Romanesque period, during which architectural, sculptural, and pictorial types were predominantly oriental in character. In all this development Rome had little or no share. Strzygowski concludes with a recommendation to theologians and to all readers of the new encyclopaedia to revise their conceptions in all directions. It is interesting to note that in an appended bibliography he mentions a half-dozen authors as having entirely erroneous views, and commends the reading of some seventeen of his own writings.

It has been our purpose to state rather than to criticise Strzygowski's general theory. We may, however, allow ourselves a few general remarks. Rome, as a cradle of Christian art, is too firmly established to be easily set aside as having a powerful influence on mediaeval and subsequent art. The spread of the Roman church throughout Europe carried with it, almost of necessity, the art forms with which that cult was associated. How much of the early art in Italy was due to initiative of Italian artists and how much was borrowed, is a question to be deter-

mined by the most careful study of specific examples. Rivoira, in his monumental work on Lombardic Architecture, has given us the best general treatise from the Italian point of view. His patriotic spirit impels him to find in Italy the origins of subsequent European art, and it is surprising to find how many prototypes of later architecture may be found without leaving the confines of Italy. On the other hand, Italy had been saturated from time immemorial with oriental and with classic influences, due to the influx of foreign artists, to the importation of foreign works of art, and to the impression made upon the minds of Roman conquerors by the great monuments of the older civilizations. However, an absolute antithesis between Rome on the one hand and the Orient on the other is an unfortunate one. Even more evidently than Alexandria and Ephesus and Antioch, Rome reflects both hellenistic and oriental influences. As our knowledge of the East increases, it becomes more and more clear that Rome was not the only centre of early Christian art. The value of Strzygowski's work consists, not in his attacks on classical or Christian scholars, but in the enthusiasm and the energy with which his scholarly efforts have opened up new vistas into the art of Asia Minor and Armenia, Syria, Egypt, and Constantinople. He has already given us so many important views of special portions of the field that we may look forward with ever-increasing interest to the promised general History of Byzantine Art, as one of the monumental works in the history of Christian art.